

Lebanese Confront Devastation After Massive Beirut Explosion

Residents of Beirut confronted a scene of utter devastation Wednesday, a day after the massive explosion at the port rippled across the Lebanese capital, killing at least 100 people, wounding thousands and leaving entire city blocks blanketed with glass and rubble.

Smoke still rose from the port, where a towering building of silos was half destroyed, spilling out grain. Hangars around it were completely toppled. The blast knocked out a crater some 200 meters (yards) across, that filled with seawater—it was as if the sea had taken a bite out of the port, swallowing buildings with it.

Much of downtown was littered with damaged vehicles and debris that had rained down from the shattered facades of buildings.

An official with the Lebanese Red Cross said at least 100 people were killed and more than 4,000 were wounded. George Kettaneh said the toll could rise further.

Scores of people were missing, with relatives pleading on social media for help locating loved ones. An Instagram page called “Locating Victims Beirut” sprang up with photos of missing, and radio presenters read names of missing or wounded people throughout the night. Many residents moved in with friends or relatives after their apartments were damaged and treated their own injuries because hospitals were overwhelmed.

Lebanon was already on the brink of collapse amid a severe economic crisis, and its capacity to deal with the disaster is crippled. With buildings severely damaged, potentially large numbers are now homeless at a time when many have lost their

jobs and seen their savings evaporate because of a currency crisis. Food security is a worry, since Lebanon imports nearly all its vital goods and its main port is devastated.

The health system is confronting a coronavirus surge, and there were concerns the virus could spread further as people flooded into hospitals.

Even as politicians vowed to help Lebanese recover, the government is strapped for cash, and the disaster threatens to further stoke public fury in a country that saw mass protests in recent months.

There was no evidence the explosion was an attack. Instead, many Lebanese blamed it on decades of corruption and poor governance by the entrenched political class that has ruled the tiny Mediterranean country since the Civil War.

Saint George University Hospital, one of the major private hospitals in Beirut which had been receiving COVID-19 patients, was out of commission Wednesday after suffering major damage. Patients were evacuated to a nearby field for primary care while staff worked on sending them to other facilities, Dr. Kamal Haddad said. Another doctor, Emile, said 16 staff and patients, including four nurses, were killed in the blast. He declined to give his last name out of privacy concerns.

The blast also wounded a number of U.N. peacekeepers at the port, including 21 Bangladeshis and one Italian. Two Egyptians and an Australian citizen were known to be among the dead.

Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi told a local TV station that it appeared the blast was caused by the detonation of more than 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in a warehouse ever since it was confiscated from a cargo ship impounded in 2013.

Explosives experts and video footage suggested the ammonium nitrate may have been ignited by a fire at what appeared to be

a nearby warehouse containing fireworks.

Ammonium nitrate is a common ingredient in fertilizer as well as explosives. It was used in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, when a truck bomb containing 2,180 kilograms (4,800 pounds) of fertilizer and fuel oil ripped through a federal building, killing 168 people and wounding hundreds more.

Security forces cordoned off the port area Wednesday as a bulldozer helped clear away debris. A young man begged troops to allow him to enter and search for his missing father. He was directed to a port official who wrote down his details.

In Beirut's hard-hit Achrafieh district, civil defense workers and soldiers worked on locating missing people and clearing rubble. At least one man was still pinned under stones from an old building that had collapsed. Volunteers hooked him up to an oxygen tank to help him breathe while others tried to free his leg.

"There are no words to describe the catastrophe that hit Beirut last night," President Michel Aoun said at a Cabinet meeting Wednesday. He vowed an investigation and that those responsible will be punished.

Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab said the government will help find shelter for those who lost their homes and compensate others whose property was damaged.

Diab, in a short televised speech, appealed for international aid, saying: "We are witnessing a real catastrophe."

There were signs of public anger already brewing.

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri visited the grave of his late father who was killed in a suicide truck bomb in February 2005, telling reporters, "They killed Beirut yesterday." After he left, protesters chanted slogans against Lebanon's entire political class, including Hariri, and fistfights broke out

between his supporters and protesters. Hariri resigned in October amid nationwide protests.

The government sought to reassure fears over the food supply, a top concern in a country where some 80% of the wheat is imported and which is also hosting over 1 million Syrians displaced by civil war.

Drone footage shot Wednesday by The Associated Press showed the blast tore open the silo building, dumping its contents into the debris and earth thrown up by the blast. Estimates suggest some 85% of the country's grain was stored at the now-wrecked silos.

Economy and Trade Minister Raoul Nehme said all the wheat stored there was contaminated and unusable. But he insisted Lebanon had enough wheat for its immediate needs and would import more, according to the state news agency.

Several countries have pledged aid, with even Israel offering humanitarian assistance. The two countries have been in conflict for decades, and Israel fought a 2006 war with the Hezbollah militant group.

Lebanon's economic crisis is rooted in decades of systemic corruption by political factions that exploit public institutions for the benefit of their supporters. Decades after the civil war, residents endure frequent power outages and poor public services.

French President Emmanuel Macron was to traveling to Beirut on Thursday to offer support and meet with Lebanese leaders. Lebanon is a former French protectorate and the countries retain close political and economic ties.

Beirut's port and the customs authority are notoriously corrupt. Like nearly all public institutions, they are controlled by political factions, including Hezbollah. {eo}

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